



A Different Kind of Bishop

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When Most Reverend Paul S. Loverde, Bishop of Arlington, VA, entered the nondescript meeting room, he arrived unnoticed among the small circles of people quietly gathered there. These are survivors of abuse by clergy. Their families and friends attend to lend support – and to seek their own comfort. One survivor, from a different faith, admits his abusers were not clergy but, choking back tears, offers me an explanation for why he came, “No one has ever prayed for me to heal before.”

These gatherings have been occurring in the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, since June 2004. Parish bulletins make announcements. Invitations are published in papers. Posters hang on cellar walls outside 12 Step recovery meetings. A website lists events, shares stories of other victims, posts heart-felt letters from the bishop and Mrs. Patricia Mudd, the Victims’ Assistance Coordinator. The message is consistent: If you have been abused by a priest anywhere but are here, now, you are entrusted to Loverde, who seeks to care for you.

I memorized the telephone number instant I saw the poster some weeks earlier. A friend, who spied me reading it, dismissed the invitation, “Oh, that’s just window dressing.” In most dioceses, it would be. Yet, it’s hard to ignore the diligence used to find me – and it’s not a predator priest looking this time.

I kept remembering a single Franciscan priest I met a decade ago. His solitary outrage over predators posing as priests gave me an anchor in the Church, and my secret burden was lightened. Having known too many predator priests before I was 18 years old, I learned through one Franciscan how it only takes a single good priest to confound the evil of many.

Why I called the number is hard to say. The memories had returned; their impact had devastated my adult life. I was lying on the couch with nothing better to do. The degree of Pat Mudd’s preparation was shocking, as if she had been sitting by the phone waiting for my call. In her, the bishop selected a seasoned social worker skilled at listening. She offered a list of many options the diocese could offer for anyone seeking help. Over several weeks she talked me off the ledge – and eventually into therapy. She kept track of me, graciously supporting me without influencing me. Mudd sent reminders for each prayer event the bishop hosted, and I faithfully promised to attend, and I routinely skipped every one. Mudd kept calling back.

Then, one night, with rock music blaring to silence my reservations, I drove through a cold, raining darkness for an evening of reflection at a retreat house. Mudd was waiting at the door. A sparkling pixie of a nun led me to the meeting room. There was no Roman collar to be seen, at first. When the bishop arrived and started to greet us – his habit is to greet each attendee individually – he did so with what I have learned since is a practiced quiet and swiftness, lest his Roman collar trigger old pain. Through the evening, he joined us for a reflection on seeking peace of heart, but most stunningly he listened intently as survivors ventured to reveal our struggles to function, to handle rage, to process grief – and to return to the Church. And, then, when he was sure everyone had been heard by him and by the priests beside him, our bishop pastor led his flock into a small chapel to hear him pray over us and with us, reminding us that our journey will take time – and that he will remain beside us.

At another prayer service some weeks later, Pat read from Lamentations, “... The thought of my homeless poverty is wormwood and gall, remembering it over and over leaves my soul downcast within me, but I will call this to mind as my reason to have hope. The favors of the Lord are not exhausted.” Fr. Mark Mealey, O.S.F.S., who with the bishop has spearheaded this outreach so unique that other dioceses now look to it as a model, addressed us with the gentility characteristic of his Salesian spirituality. He briefly shared his own pain over our suffering and Church failures, but what struck me and

others was that this priest not only acknowledged our stories but also urged us, when we were ready, to share them.

Their commitment to ministry trumping the PR posturing favored by others, Loverde and Mealey confidently believe what much of the Church has oddly forgotten: There is redemption in this process. Inviting my story allows me to let go of the burden, but Mealey reminds me that is not enough. My story can also teach people, among them priests, how to minister better to all survivors – and to others gripped by any private agony. This one priest reflects this one bishop’s hope that priests will again be free to give dignity to all suffering, regardless of the evil doer, clearing a path toward reconciliation and redemption in the Church.

Teresa Hartnett founded and works with Spirit Fire, which promotes collaboration with survivors in Christ-centered restorative justice for adults, families and faith communities wounded by child abuse. Spirit Fire offers spiritual mediation, pastoral training and survivor partnerships to inspire and energize Catholic and all other Christian ministries. For our resources and services, see SpiritFire.Live today.

